



# 3HO/Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere: The 'Forgotten' New Religious Movement?

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## Abstract

This article will give a general overview of a Sikh movement that originated in the 1960s with an immigrant from India known as Harbhajan Singh, a Khatri Sikh. His initial aim was to teach yoga in Canada, but the job he was promised did not materialize, and thus it was that he turned his attention towards California. In Los Angeles, he took on a new name, Yogi Bhajan, and soon surrounded himself with eager students. An ashram was built soon thereafter and by 1969 his 'Healthy, Happy, Holy' group was incorporated as a tax exempt organization. Although Bhajan was from a traditional Sikh family, he increasingly focused on Kundalini Yoga and Tantra in his teaching and practices. However, Sikh teachings were also incorporated into his message, a message that was largely directed towards a white, middle-class, counter-culture audience. Needless to say, the Punjabi Sikh community has had a mixed reaction to the 'Gora' (white) converts, particularly with regard to the accretions and modifications to the Sikh traditions, upheld by Bhajan and his followers. This article will address aspects of 3HO (or Sikh Dharma in the Western Hemisphere) in its current manifestation that resembles characteristics of new religious movements, particularly its claims to universality and purity within its own manifestation of 'true' Sikh identity.

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## Introduction

In the heyday of the 'great American cult scare' of the late 1970s and the 1980s 3HO, the Happy, Holy, Healthy Organization, later known as Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere, was commonly included in the litany of new religious movements, or 'cults', formulated by scholars, anti-cultists and the mass media. Yet, curiously little scholarly work has been done on this group, although it has survived and in many respects, prospered. Examining many of the standard resources used to acquire information on new religious movements [hereafter cited as new religious movements (NRM)], it is noteworthy that the organization (hereafter cited as 3HO/Sikh Dharma) is largely ignored.<sup>1</sup> There are many reasons that might explain this curious omission. One is its ambiguous status as a 'new religious movement'. While bearing many of the marks of a NRM,

for Western scholars unfamiliar with the Sikh tradition it remains unclear whether 3HO/Sikh Dharma warrants being viewed as a new religion, an imported religion, or, simply fitting into the sectarian divisions within Sikhism. The confusion in classification is similar to that experienced with such groups as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), Vajradhatu/Shambhala, and Sahaja Yoga. But the public controversies surrounding some of these groups soon catapulted them into the 'cult' category where they received the attention of NRMs researchers. Goldman has argued that 3HO/Sikh Dharma, among hundreds of other such groups, has largely passed under the radar of research because the group has simply not been perceived as 'controversial' enough, and has in many ways successfully integrated into society at large (Goldman 2006, p. 90). Certainly, for the past 10–20 years, Sikh Dharma has largely avoided being grouped into the cult category, despite the attention given in the media to some of its own controversial practices and scandals. The ambiguity is also not resolved for those approaching the group with some knowledge of the Sikh religion, for then the group may be viewed as simply another sect within a seemingly tolerant and rather heterodox Sikh tradition. It can be argued certainly that Sikhism has been adept at incorporating varied and even dissenting identities and practices (see especially Oberoi 1994), yet the history of this group reveals a complex and problematic relationship with the rest of the Sikh community. It has been both accepted in some ways and rejected in others. There is little doubt, however, that 3HO/Sikh Dharma's origins are firmly embedded in the social phenomenon giving rise to the other well-known NRMs of the 1960s and 1970s in North America.<sup>2</sup> Reflecting on this situation casts light on the nature of this extraordinary group and the study and classification of NRMs in general.

In this article, I will give a brief overview of the development of the movement since its founding in the late 1960s, then attempt to situate it, utilizing the demarcating characteristics of NRMs developed by Eileen Barker (2004). This will lead us to a consideration of the complex relationship between 3HO/Sikh Dharma and the wider Sikh *panth* (community). The increased rapport between Sikhs of Punjabi Indian origin and 3HO/Sikh Dharma membership may have contributed to the lack of interest in this group on the part of scholars of NRMs. 3HO/Sikh Dharma appears to be simply subsumed within the larger umbrella of Sikhism in North America, a view that the organization itself has actively fostered. As we shall see, however, the differences between the two groups are significant. In the end, 3HO/Sikh Dharma should be treated as a NRM, and given more attention for its unique blending of Eastern and Western ideas and lifestyles. This article will argue that in recent years the advent of the Internet and the events of 9/11 have played an important role in adjusting the relationship between 3HO/Sikh Dharma and the rest of the Sikh diaspora in ways that have further muddled the waters.

*The Origins and Development of 3HO/Sikh Dharma*

The Happy, Holy, Healthy Organization (3HO) was founded in 1969 by a Punjabi Sikh, Harbhajan Singh Puri, later known as Yogi Bhasan. Puri had worked as a customs official in India before leaving for the USA in 1968. He began teaching Kundalini Yoga classes in Los Angeles to largely white, middle-class audience of American 'flower-children'. Insisting on the avoidance of intoxicants, he offered a path to fulfillment and enlightenment through rigorous yogic discipline (*sadhana*) and healthy living. He drew on what he called 'white Tantric yoga' to bring the masculine and feminine energies in each of his followers into balance. The 'refugees from the counter-culture' who became his followers saw themselves not as Sikhs 'but as "yogis" and "yoginis" or, in Puri's terminology, "shaktimen" and "shaktis"' (Dusenberry 1990, p. 344). Eventually, he spoke to his students about Sikhism, but his primary focus was clearly on yogic techniques that were not associated with Sikh ideals or practices.

Then, in 1971, Bhasan took a group of his followers to the Golden Temple in Amritsar, Punjab, the holiest shrine of the Sikhs. After this visit, he began to introduce his follows to Sikh practices and tenets, and in 1973 the Sikh Dharma Brotherhood was officially registered (changed later to the more gender inclusive name Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere). Soon a large number of his followers were initiated into the Khalsa, the Sikh 'saint-soldier' ideal, adopting the Five Ks, the symbols of the Khalsa order. Each of the five symbols begins with the letter 'k' in the Punjabi language and are thus referred to as the five Ks: *kirpan* – a dagger, *kara* – an iron bracelet, *kesh* – unshorn hair, *kacch* – breeches, *kangha* – a small comb worn in the hair. The majority of Sikhs are not initiated into the Khalsa, but many of Bhasan's followers undertook this central ritual as evidence of their devotion and integration into Sikhism. Many also took on, like many Punjabi Sikhs, the middle name Singh for males, and Kaur for females. However, unlike Sikhs of Indian origin, they also adopted Khalsa as their last name, and introduced some innovations to Punjabi Sikh dress, sporting only white traditional Punjabi clothes and white turbans, for both women and men (Elsberg 2003, p. 3).<sup>3</sup> Traditionally, the turban is worn only by Sikh males.<sup>4</sup> According to some recent accounts, the exclusively white Punjabi clothing stems from the influence of one of Yogi Bhasan's early teachers, Baba Virsa Singh who until his death in December 2007 was the spiritual leader at an ashram known as Gobind Sadan in Delhi, another sectarian group with its basis in the Sikh tradition.<sup>5</sup>

Not until the 1970s did Bhasan foster the ties to traditional Sikhism. In 1974, he formed the Khalsa Council, consisting initially of a small number of devotees from his inner circle. Today, this council is an 'international body of 200 ministers who meet twice a year to serve the spirit of Sikh Dharma in the Western Hemisphere' (Welcome to the Khalsa Council 2006). Male ministers are given the title of Singh Sahib, and females,

Sardarni Sahiba (Takhar 2005, p. 162), and they are entrusted with administering Sikh initiation, marriage and death rites for their followers (Dusenbery 1990, p. 345).<sup>6</sup> Despite the apparent attempt to bring the group closer to traditional Sikhism, these designations in terms of leadership are entirely unique to 3HO/Sikh Dharma as they do not exist within the wider Sikh community.

Opinderjit Takhar makes a relatively clear distinction between 3HO and the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere (Takhar 2005, p. 158). 3HO, according to Takhar, is not necessarily a 'Sikh' organization, given that its founding focused almost exclusively on Kundalini Yoga and Tantra. Sikh Dharma, on the other hand, has concrete origins in more traditional aspects of Sikhism. Nonetheless, she acknowledges that both Kundalini Yoga and Tantricism are central elements of Sikh Dharma as well. According to Constance Elsberg (2003, p. 15):

One can participate in 3HO activities without becoming a Sikh, but 3HO and Sikh Dharma are intertwined in many practical ways, which reflects the fact that many members' beliefs are a syncretic mix of Sikhism and yogic traditions (and also incorporate elements of New Age and counter culture thought).

Elsberg's important study on 3HO/Sikh Dharma generally conflates these two parallel organizations, or, describes Bhajan's followers simply as 'American Sikhs'. She does at times make the distinctions between 3HO as a teaching and outreach organization and Sikh Dharma as the administrative and religious arm of the larger organization.

On 6 October 2004, the man known variously as Siri Singh Sahib Bhai Sahib Harbhajan Singh Khalsa Yogiji, Yogi Bhajan, Harbhajan Singh Yogi, Harbhajan Singh Puri died at the age of 75 of heart failure. At this time, it is still unclear what his death will mean for the future of 3HO/Sikh Dharma. Since his demise, *The New Mexican* has reported that a significant court case has been instigated by a number of Bhajan's long-time assistants against his widow Inderjit Kaur Puri over the allocation of funds held by Puri that they claim are rightfully theirs (Sharpe 2007). As with many NRMs, it was Bhajan's charisma that held the group together. Clearly, with his death the future of the group is somewhat ambiguous, particularly given that litigation processes are already in place over the vast empire that he so ably commandeered. Perhaps not surprisingly, one of the greatest challenges facing communal organizations such as 3HO/Sikh Dharma comes when there is a perceived vacuum in leadership, leading either to anarchy or apathy, something that appears to have started soon after Bhajan's death (Greenwood 1993).

### *Is 3HO/Sikh Dharma a New Religious Movement?*

For an overall perspective on this question, we will call on the seven defining characteristics of NRMs recently outlined by Eileen Barker

(2004), a leading scholar of such groups. Barker's suggestions will be utilized as guideposts in coming to a more detailed understanding of 3HO/Sikh Dharma.

The difficulties scholars have faced in defining NRMs have recently come to the fore in an exchange of views between two pioneers of the field, J. Gordon Melton and Eileen Barker. Melton (2004) questions Barker's focus on the specific characteristics of NRMs, positing that 'new religions are . . . primarily defined not by any characteristic(s) that they share, but by the tension in their relationships with other forms of religious life . . . ' (p. 81). These groups are 'new', primarily because they are deemed to be at odds, in important ways, with other dominant traditions. Yet, Melton argues, NRMs are best classified in terms of the religious families from which they have emerged (e.g. Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, Theosophical, Pentecostal). These lineages tell us much about the nature of the groups under study, so NRMs are defined by both their continuity with and deviance from established religious beliefs and practices (see also Robbins 2005, p. 104, 108). The relevance of this approach to the study of 3HO/Sikh Dharma is apparent, but there is more at stake.

Barker acknowledges the value of Melton's perspective yet she has 'stood her ground', insisting that these different approaches may in fact have more to do with each scholar's training and discipline than the nature of NRMs. She notes (Barker 2004, p. 91):

[B]y looking at an NRM through the glasses of an historian of religions, one might more readily focus on the beliefs, and, perhaps, the institutional claims of both old and new religions, whereas employing the glasses of a social scientist might encourage one to concentrate more on the actions of believers, their lifestyle, leadership patterns and organization.

The latter approach has tended to dominate the discourse on NRMs, if only because sociologists, like Barker, have taken such a keen interest in the phenomenon. Suffice it to say here, the discourse on NRMs is in a state of flux and this article is not of the scope to attempt to resolve the definitional debate.

Given the lack of focus on 3HO/Sikh Dharma in the literature of the field, this preliminary study will combine both approaches. Barker's seven characteristics serve as a useful starting point for identifying this group as a NRM. Then, the focus will turn to 3HO/Sikh Dharma's relationship with the wider Sikh *panth* as well, to highlight some of the unique features of this group and come to grips with relevant issues of authority and identity within the wider Sikh tradition.

NRMS BY THEIR VERY NATURE ARE BOUND TO BE SMALL IN THEIR EARLY DAYS

This was certainly true of 3HO/Sikh Dharma, but not for long. There is no reliable data, however, on the membership of 3HO/Sikh Dharma. The

ashram founded by Bhajan in the early 1970s currently houses 300 families (Sharpe 2007). In 1986, Melton estimated the group to have 10,000 adherents. The Australian journalist Sara MacDonald cites the same figure almost 20 years later in her popular travelogue *Holy Cow: An Indian Adventure* (MacDonald 2002, p. 106). Her estimate comes from an interview with a long-time member of the religion.<sup>7</sup> The numbers must be held suspect, however, given the relatively small number of member families associated with Yogi Bhajan's New Mexico ashram, the headquarters of the group, where about 300 3HO/Sikh Dharma families reside (Sharpe). There are insignificant numbers of members outside of Espanola headquarters. Clearly, the group has not grown significantly since its early days, and has, in all likelihood, diminished in numbers, which may explain why 3HO/Sikh Dharma has slipped under the radar of most NRM researchers. But NRMs are prone typically to high rates of turn over, and *if* there are indeed 10,000 members, the number is comparatively quite remarkable. One difficulty in gauging the number of actual adherents is the sketchy quality of the information available from 3HO/Sikh Dharma-based institutions, such as the 3HO Kundalini Research Institute, which lists teachers-in-training, yoga students and instructors. While it may be tempting to view these individuals as part and parcel of the movement, it is far more likely that the majority are simply interested yoga practitioners on the fringes of the organization.<sup>8</sup> As such, they are best understood as clients or consumers within the pluralistic spiritual marketplace developed by many NRMSs, including 3HO, which has sought a specific market niche within the wider society (Goldman 2006, p. 90).

#### NRMS CONTAIN ATYPICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE WIDER POPULACE

Again, it would appear that this holds true for 3HO/Sikh Dharma. As Barker and others have observed, the first wave of NRMs in the USA were disproportionately young, white and from the better educated classes.<sup>9</sup> It is probable that the devotees of Bhajan were also distinctive in other ways. Barker (2004) states that the members of most NRMs are likely to be relatively healthy, without dependents, and highly enthusiastic, given their youth (pp. 95–6). This was certainly the case with 3HO/Sikh Dharma, given its stress on healthy living and physical well-being, and fairly strenuous meditation and yoga. The group became entwined with the larger health food movement, for which it was soon producing products. One of Yogi Bhajan's books is *Food for Health and Healing*, and their Yogi Teas and Peace Cereals are widely available in health food stores and elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> With time, the organization has become increasingly involved in the manufacture and preparation of organic foods. It is likely that this integration with the larger consumer trend, in and of itself, has heightened societal acceptance of 3HO/Sikh Dharma, a point that will be subsequently addressed.

FIRST-GENERATION MEMBERSHIP CHOOSE THE NRM; THEY ARE NOT BORN INTO IT

This was certainly the case with 3HO. Following closely on Barker's first characteristic, most converts were young, dependent-less seekers. Harvey Cox (1977) noted this too in his early study of the 'neo-Oriental' movements that he encountered in the Boston area in the 1960s and 1970s, including the Hare Krishnas, Sufi dancers and 'self-styled Sikhs' (p. 10).

Given that 3HO is in its fourth decade of operation, the youthful focus of the early years has changed obviously. However, very little empirical information is available on second- and third-generation American Sikhs. Nonetheless, the concerns of 3HO/Sikh Dharma now include support systems and institutions for the offspring of their followers, and a brief overview of one such institution is perhaps in order.

The Miri Piri Academy, outside Amritsar in the Punjab, is a residential school for grades 1–12. The school has been constructed on land leased to the institution by the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbhandak Committee, the premier overseer of the majority of Punjab gurdwaras. The Academy currently houses and teaches about 100 3HO/Sikh Dharma children (Dusenbery forthcoming), although a number of other schools also have been utilized, rather unsuccessfully it seems, by 3HO/Sikh Dharma.<sup>11</sup> According to Elsberg (forthcoming), by sending their children to India, parents are seeking to 'protect the children from the attitudes and the "sex and drugs" that permeated the American school system'.

An online video archive of Sikh Dharma members includes an interview with Kirin Kaur Khalsa, an early adherent. She addresses 3HO/Sikh Dharma expectations regarding the separation of children and their parents, based on what she describes as Yogi Bhajan's 'Distance Therapy'. According to Khalsa, Bhajan insisted that while children clearly need close contact with parents when they are very young, it is also important to separate them from the parents. This process, Khalsa says,

[A]ctually gives a child themselves . . . We have learned through our yogic teachings from [Yogi Bhajan] . . . to send them away . . . Discipline is a great big aspect of the life that we live, and to send these children away so they can find themselves and they can find their own inner discipline and their connection to their souls . . . our children are very connected to their soul and their spirit and their dharmic values . . . The Golden Temple [then] becomes their home . . . (Khalsa 2007)

Elsberg addresses this issue in her interviews with 3HO/Sikh Dharma women. Most women did follow Bhajan's injunctions, but as one informant reveals, while insisting that the 'children are God's children and not my children', the separation is difficult, not only for the mothers, but also for the children. One of these children recounted feeling 'abandoned' and lonely. 'Physical punishment was sometimes employed . . . and the years apart . . . affected the relationship with her parents. Many students, upon

their sojourn in India, reject strict 3HO/Sikh Dharma norms, clearly falling within the “second generation” NRM phenomenon of being “less doctrinaire” (Elsberg 2003, pp. 192–4) than their parents.

#### THE FOUNDER OF THE MOVEMENT IS LIKELY A CHARISMATIC LEADER

There can be little doubt about the special and seemingly charismatic status of Yogi Bhanjan. He was the originator of 3HO/Sikh Dharma, both ideologically and organizationally, and ruled the group with more or less unquestioned authority until his death. In his own typically cryptic manner, he has provided the following account of the origin of that authority, of his transformation from student to master:

When I was about sixteen and a half, I didn't have any feeling that I'll go before my teacher and what he's going to say . . . I went in. But there was a habit to obey. The law is: 'Obey, Serve, Love, and Excel.' This is the spiritual essence. So I had the habit to obey my teacher. I went in. I bowed down. I got up. He said, 'Bhanjan, it is a very special day. I have called you.' I said, 'Yes, Master.' 'You are the Master.' 'Yes, Sir.' Out of habit I said, 'Yes, Sir.' I said, 'Yes, Sir.' He said, 'That's it. Well, there are certain conditions with it.' I said, 'Please let me know.' He said certain things. 'Thank you, Sir.' 'You can retire now.' I came out. There were twenty-five to thirty people, whatever they were. 'What happened, what happened?' 'Don't you see?' 'No.' 'Don't you know?' 'No.' I said, 'I am the master. Bow!' And they all bowed. I said, 'Wow! It works!' I said, 'Now rise! This is what happened! That's what the master said, "I am the master."' 'Yes, sir.' Because they had the same conscious habit to obey, too. There was no logic, no reason, no debate, no asking, no questioning . . . nothing. (Bhanjan 1990)

Bhanjan's lectures to his followers were often fragmentary and enigmatic, yet his words catered to their needs, to the 'rebels' of the age. He saw himself as a rebel as well, rather bombastically declaring that he was the 'greatest religious rebel ever India will remember or has ever been produced . . .' (Bhanjan 1989a).

Like most charismatic leaders, he was by nature an innovator, and he fashioned a larger than life image of himself. He promised 'new' forms of freedom through his techniques of self-awareness, the practice of kundalini yoga, prescriptions for healthy living, and novel forms of community (ashrams were established early in the movement's development).<sup>12</sup> He enjoined his listeners to 'decide what price you think life is for you. Is it real? Then become God. If it is a joke, then search for God. May I repeat again, those who are searching, they are never home. Those who are home, they are not searching' (Bhanjan 1989b). For young people who found traditional religious institutions lacking in spiritual depth and meaning, for those who were suspicious of the clear-cut or perfunctory answers they had received to their religious and philosophical questions, Bhanjan offered a new, seemingly holistic vision based on his own



declarations of a distinctive calling. He claimed that his teachers had passed the mantle of 'Mahan Tantric' on to him. Moreover, he was

... [T]he only person in the world entitled to teach white Tantric yoga ... According to one informant ... 'white Tantric yoga had not been practiced on this planet for fifty or one hundred years ... and we had to burn a place for us in the universe ...' Yogi Bhajan takes on the struggles and sufferings of the entire membership as Tantric participants are merged in group energy and consciousness. (Elsberg 2003, pp. 51–2)

Bhajan also professed to have close ties with Sant Hazara Singh, part of a long lineage of revered Sikh teachers, thus establishing his Sikh credentials. This latter connection was disputed, however, by a highly respected Sikh scholar, Trilochan Singh (1977, p. 108).<sup>13</sup> In addition, he began using the title Siri Singh Sahib, which he said was given to him by the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, elevating him supposedly to the status of *the* Sikh leader of the Western Hemisphere.<sup>14</sup> Thus, his professed stature as both a premier yogi and a reputable Sikh leader were used to legitimate and enhanced his charismatic authority.

#### NRMS FOCUS ON NEW BELIEF SYSTEMS

Bhajan's approach to religious systems of thought and practice was clearly eclectic and anomalous. According to Robbins et al. (1975), NRMs have typically served this integrative function, developing systems of meaning that 'combine or synthesize countercultural values with traditional or mainstream orientations' (Robbins et al. 1975, pp. 49–51). Bhajan combined a primary focus on Kundalini and Tantric practices (including both Buddhist and Hindu versions of the latter, and a strong emphasis on goddess traditions) with aspects of Karma Yoga, Hatha Yoga and Bhakti Yoga, while simultaneously asserting the centrality of Sikh tenets (Elsberg 2003, p. 45; Dusenbery 1975, p. 19). His views were also influenced, however, by ideas from fringe elements of the Sikh community, including Baba Virsa Singh, the leader of a loosely Sikh based ashram, with centres in India and the USA (known as Gobind Sadan). Virsa Singh claimed a special connection to Baba Sri Chand, a son of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism. Reverence for Sri Chand, highly untenable for Punjabi Sikhs, has also become part of 3HO/Sikh Dharma gurdwaras in North America. In one gurdwara, there is an almost life-sized statue of Sri Chand (Lamba 2006, pp. 50–1).<sup>15</sup>

Bhajan also incorporated rhetoric from the New Age, Human Potential and broader countercultural movements into his approach. Cox tells of a Punjabi Sikh student who was fascinated with this new 'breed' of Sikhs. After observing the workings of the 3HO, the student reported to Cox that

[T]heir religious practice and ideas bore only the faintest resemblance to the Sikh teachings he had been reared on his whole life. Although the outward

forms appeared similar – these young people also let their hair grow and wore turbans and wrist daggers – the meaning they attached to these practices turned out to be a mixture of astral metaphysics and esoteric lore completely unfamiliar to the young Indian, who wrote with good humor that his fellow Sikhs in India would be very surprised to learn that in the 3HO movement the long hair is gathered on the forehead and covered by a turban to protect a particularly sensitive area of the brain from malignant cosmic rays. Obviously, studying this group in terms of classical Sikhism would cause more confusion than clarification . . .’ (Cox 1977, p. 19)

The relationship between Punjabi Sikhs and 3HO/Sikh Dharma will be discussed below, but what Cox identifies as the ‘confusing’ changes brought about by this new brand of Sikhism are crucial to determining if this group is indeed a NRM. All the more so given the repeated claims made by Yogi Bhanan that he represents Sikhism in North America. The American media have accepted and repeated these claims in an uncritical fashion, making the status of the group more than simply an academic concern (Dusenberry 1990, p. 345).

Bhanan seems to have comprehended the societal needs of the 1960s and 1970s brilliantly, strategically adapting his teachings to reach the disaffected youth of the age. But, according to Barker (2004, p. 92):

[I]n a sense . . . nothing is new; nothing is ever completely *ex nihilo* if only because it will be constructed by socialized human beings and it will encompass, at least in part, some pre-existing components. It can equally well be claimed that there is another sense in which everything is new; social reality is an on-going process that is mediated through individuals who bring new perspectives and understandings as they continually recreate even the oldest traditions.

Bhanan offered followers an eclectic blend of old and new, a syncretistic system that offered his disciples unique ways of relating to the ‘outside’ world and to each other, during a time of spiritual uncertainty and quest.<sup>16</sup> The fact that the movement has survived, and in some ways even thrived, attests to the surprising viability of that vision.

A SOCIAL BOUNDARY BETWEEN THOSE ‘IN’ AND THOSE ‘OUT’ – IN OTHER WORDS, A THEM/US DIVIDE

The followers of Bhanan are separated from the rest of society by a series of fairly obvious and pronounced physical and symbolic boundaries, in terms of how they dress, eat, live communally, as well as their unusual religious doctrines and practices. They live in another world from us in a fairly literal sense, while technically being our neighbours. They are, as the saying goes, in this world but not really of it. But the question of boundaries is complex for this group and goes to the heart of the discussion of its status as a NRM, or not.

Within North American society at large, the white-robed, bearded and turbaned adherents clearly maintain an outsider status. However, from the perspective of many Sikhs immigrants in North America, 3HO/Sikh Dharma adherents are in many ways viewed as insiders. As native North Americans, they understand and are comfortable with the culture around them; moreover, they benefit from having the right skin colour. But then in another respect, when viewed through the lens of the normative expectations of the Sikh *panth*, these converts to the faith are still treated as more or less outsiders. This issue will be addressed further below, but suffice it to say that the relationship between immigrant Sikhs and converts is in constant flux, and has been the source of considerable discomfort for Punjabi Sikhs.

By giving a messianic twist to his teachings, Bhajan sought to reduce the boundaries, in some respects, between 3HO/Sikh Dharma and some other NRMs and spiritual seekers. He taught that his teachings were an important component of 'the New Age' that was dawning, for which everyone needed to prepare. One of his followers insisted that America was 'one of the irreverent, hedonistic societies in the world' (Khalsa 1979, p. 344 in Elsberg 2003, p. 62); yet, there was hope as a 'God-centred' focus on healthy and holistic living was slowly thought to be transforming the world. 'One white-clad follower of the life to be healthy, happy and holy should be enough to take away from the loneliness, the sickness from the whole locality' (Bhajan 1974, p. 8). Bhajan gave his followers a task, namely, to help usher in the age of Aquarius (Elsberg 2003, pp. 61–2). In a special address to the Khalsa Council, Bhajan exhorted his followers to

[T]ouch people, with the magic touch of this kundalini yoga, and that will bring you, like each drop of rain will make it a tributary, and each tributary will make a river, and each river makes the ocean, so that the cycle of life may complete . . . (Bhajan 1987)

The divide between insiders and outsiders is, as such, only temporary, for the task is to diminish the gulf between these groups through the creation of the New Age for all.

#### NRMS ARE OFTEN FACED WITH EXTERNAL HOSTILITY BY THE WIDER COMMUNITY

It is not surprising that this 'Straight-Freak-Yogi-Sikh'<sup>17</sup> movement faced a great deal of external hostility in its early years, given its adoption of white Punjabi garb, including turbaned men and women, flowing beards for men, communal living arrangements in ashrams, and arguably a slavish devotion to their master. Yet, it would be remiss not to bring in another important aspect of Bhajan's legacy, namely his keen business acumen. His organization is an unqualified success story, from a purely economic perspective, and this success has reduced the tension with the rest of society.

Bhajan's Sikh Dharma ashram in Sombrillo, near Espanola, New Mexico has been the centre of his multi-billion dollar empire since 1971. This multifaceted enterprise, known as Khalsa International Industries and Trades, includes the production of health foods and teas, as well as Akal Security, one of the largest private security companies in North America (Martin 2004).<sup>18</sup> Consequently, when Bhajan passed away in 2004 tributes were paid at both the state and federal level. Bill Richardson, the Governor of New Mexico commended Bhajan as a social, religious and political leader, ordering 'that all flags be flown at half-staff . . . in mourning . . .' (State of New Mexico). In the House of Representatives, a resolution was passed honouring Bhajan for his promotion of better 'personal, political, spiritual, and professional relations between citizens of the United States and the citizens of India,' as well as 'recognizing the legendary compassion, wisdom, kindness, and courage of Yogi Bhajan, and his wealth of accomplishments on behalf of the Sikh community . . .' (House of Representatives, 109th Congress).

These endorsements of Bhajan as an exemplary citizen from the highest levels of government are noteworthy, given Bhajan's many detractors. These include ex-3HO/Sikh Dharma members, loudly proclaiming they had been brainwashed,<sup>19</sup> their resounding denunciation of Yogi Bhajan as a cult leader as well as their supporters in anti-cult organizations.<sup>20</sup> As the latter have documented, the group has been involved in numerous legal cases involving accusations of criminal activity. But as Dusenbery (forthcoming) observes, 'his personal and political power as a global religious personage of note is well attested to in the letters of condolence and tribute that were received upon his death.'<sup>21</sup>

### *The Strained Relations of 3HO/Sikh Dharma and the Punjabi Sikh Community*

In speaking of 3HO/Sikh Dharma's relationship with the wider, largely American community, it is also important to recognize the even more complex dynamic with the wider *Sikh* community, namely, the Punjabi Sikh community. It is this relationship that Melton (2004) emphasizes in his conception of what constitutes a NRM. To what extent does the 3HO/Sikh Dharma align itself with the dominant Sikh tradition? To what extent, is it accepted by that tradition? Given some of 3HO/Sikh Dharma's unorthodox, and syncretistic, system of beliefs and practices, it is not surprising that there are tensions between Punjabi and American Sikhs. Some Sikh leaders go so far as to deny that the group is 'Sikh'. Some of their objections are related to the lifestyle of 3HO/Sikh Dharma. Many dislike the standard 'uniform' of 3HO/Sikh Dharma followers. For Punjabi Sikhs, the all-white traditional clothing is associated with mourning and largely linked to the inauspiciousness of widowhood. Women wearing turbans is 'almost unheard of . . . [as] a turban is a male symbol

par excellence' for Indian Sikhs (Dusenbery 1990, pp. 346–7).<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the vegetarianism that is a central facet of 'being' Sikh for 3HO/Sikh Dharma, is not held as normative for Punjabi Sikhs, particularly for Jat Sikhs, the caste that forms the majority of the Sikh *panth*.

Other criticisms are directed at Bhajan's teachings and other innovations. While adherents of 3HO/Sikh Dharma, for example, understand Kundalini yoga to be a mystical discipline that is part and parcel of 'orthodox' Sikh practice, most Punjabi Sikhs think it is 'incompatible with the life of a householder enjoined on Sikhs' (Dusenbery 1990, pp. 346–7). Punjabi Sikhs also accuse 3HO/Sikh Dharma of misquoting and mis-translating passages from the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the sacred scripture of the Sikhs. But perhaps sternest censure is invoked by the veneration and reverence of Yogi Bhajan, known to his followers as Siri Singh Sahib (literally the 'Exalted Lord Singh'), a title reserved by Punjabi Sikhs for the traditional Sikh Gurus, the *Guru Granth Sahib* and other seats of Sikh spiritual authority. Dusenbery (1990, pp. 346–7) has noted that the 'formation of organizational structures and an ecclesiastical hierarchy independent of, inconsistent with, and at cross purposes to, the traditional Panthic organization' has also proven to be an abiding source of aggravation between the two groups.

Perhaps most importantly, many Punjabi Sikhs resent 'the superior ways the 3HO displays towards them' (Bharati 1980, p. 249). As noted, the majority of Punjabi Sikhs within diasporan contexts are not initiated into the Khalsa order, and, they do not maintain the full external insignia of the Khalsa Sikh. But 3HO/Sikh Dharma members have unequivocally asserted that 'true' Sikh practice must 'supersede parochial "ethnic" (i.e. Punjabi) custom' (Dusenbery 1990, p. 346; see also Fenton 1988, p. 148). They have also been highly critical of gender and caste inequalities deeply embedded within the parent community (Elsberg 2003, p. 81), the politicization of many Punjabi Sikh gurdwaras, and the larger community's lax stance towards alcohol consumption and in dealing with drug addiction among Punjabi youth (Khalsa 2006). Again, the tension between converts and ethnic members of minority religions in North America is not unique to the Sikhs and 3HO/Sikh Dharma. Similar to the ISKCON members in relation to ethnic Hindus, issues of caste and gender inequalities, ethnic and religious divisions that appear to be central to Hindu communities both in North America and in India, are viewed as necessarily surmountable by converts through *true* spiritual advancement Prabhupada's message of Krishna consciousness (Zaidman 2000, pp. 214–5).

These tensions are aggravated by the public persona cultivated by 3HO/Sikh Dharma. Dusenbery (1990, pp. 346–7) comments that Bhajan's followers have

[A]sserted their right to a full public expression of their version of Sikh orthopraxy and have sought aggressively to have their 'religious rights'

recognized by the media and administrative and legal channels. 3HO has actively courted publicity and their 'exoticness' (e.g. white clothing, beards, turbans, *ashrams*, mass marriages and strange 'Indian' names) and their 'good works' (e.g. drug rehabilitation programs, free kitchens) and have made them 'good copy'.

Significantly, many of the court cases involving the protection of the religious rights of Sikhs have been initiated by 3HO/Sikh Dharma members, and legal officials have, unquestioning acknowledged these petitioners to be representatives of the Sikh tradition. As Dusenbery (1990, pp. 346–7) notes, this 'activity has made the converts known beyond what their numbers might otherwise warrant.' However, as Fenggang Yang and Helen Ebaugh have recently shown, this is not unique to the Sikhs and 3HO/Sikh Dharma. In their study focusing on Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims, converts 'are often designated as spokespersons for the religion when dealing with the larger society.' In other words, through non-ethnic converts, a 'fast track to Americanization' (Yang & Ebaugh 2001, p. 283) and a legitimization of the minority tradition within the wider society can outweigh many negative associations that occur between members of ethnic religions and non-ethnic converts.

Ultimately, as pointed out by McLeod, Punjabi Sikhs have had difficulty in deciding 'whether to embrace the followers as unusually devout or to avoid them as perversely unorthodox . . .' Clearly, many Punjabi Sikhs 'candidly admire the strict Sikh ritual discipline of the 3HO, and grudgingly admire their teetotalitarian ways (Bharati 1980, p. 249). In the end, the 'answer appears to be to let them live their life of obedience, and Punjabis will live another, seldom the twain meeting in any meaningful way. They are accepted as Sikhs provided they maintain a separate existence' (McLeod 1989, pp. 118–9). The two groups, according to McLeod's assessment might readily be designated as 'two Sikhisms' along the lines of Buddhist scholar Charles Prebish's (1979) 'two Buddhisms' approach (p. 51).<sup>23</sup>

### *Contemporary Issues and the Changing Relationship of 3HO/Sikh Dharma and the Sikh Panth*

Two significant and unanticipated developments have had an impact on Punjabi Sikh and 3HO/Sikh Dharma relations in recent years: (i) the sophisticated application and appropriation of the Internet by 3HO/Sikh Dharma and (ii) the tragic events of 9/11. Pausing to consider the role of the Internet on NRMs at large, Barker (2004) notes that little attention has been given to 'ways in which the internal functioning of . . . [religious] movements has been affected by the new medium' (p. 67). According to Marion Goldman, not only the Internet but globalization too must be taken into consideration when looking at the rise in interest in new religions. Clearly, there is something novel in

NRM's visible proliferation and also their approachability (Goldman 2006, pp. 88–9).

At the outset, it must be clearly stated that it is not *only* 3HO/Sikh Dharma that has carved a significant 'space' for itself online; mainstream Sikh virtual organizations and websites associated with traditional Sikh institutions abound. But the online presence of 3HO/Sikh Dharma *is* highly influential and is, arguably, a significant 'Sikh voice' in terms of the level of sophistication, accessibility, variability and comprehensiveness of their sites. Cyberspace is, according to Douglas Cowan, contested space; it is 'simply one more venue in which struggles for dominance and authority in the real world are carried out' (Cowan 2004, p. 257). And this vying for authority is clearly in evidence within the Sikh online presence. Similar to Gary Bunt's observations of cyber Islamic environments (Bunt 2000, p. 8), the marginal perspective of 3HO/Sikh Dharma is presented as normative through the sophisticated representation articulated in cyberspace. It can be argued that 3HO/Sikh Dharma has become *the*, or at least *a significant*, 'authoritative reference' (Axel 2004) of Sikh identity online. As a highly established and even thriving online entity, new groups 'do pose a significant challenge to official religious traditions' (Helland 2004, p. 30). Through the constant reproduction of online texts and images highlighting this particular Sikh identity 3HO/Sikh Dharma have become key 'signifiers' of Sikhism, despite their marginal status within the wider Sikh community.

The tragic events of 9/11 have also had an effect on 3HO/Sikh Dharma relations with Punjabi American Sikhs. Those Sikhs who adhere to the outwards manifestation of Sikh identity, namely, the keeping of uncut hair and the accompanying turban, were particularly affected by the events of 9/11. Many were identified as turban-wearing Muslims instead of Sikhs. One of the first victims of the anti-Muslim backlash in the USA was a Sikh, Balbir Singh Sodhi, who was shot to death at his gas station in Mesa, Arizona. His crime was that of wearing a turban that (mis)identified him as a cohort of Osama Bin Laden.

This tragic event has led to a significant acknowledgement of the necessity of putting aside differences and embracing an understanding of Sikhism as a multinational religion, even though Paul Numrich (2000) contents that Sikhism, unlike Buddhism and Islam, does not display a very strong universalist tendency and holds to a largely monoethnic developmental pattern (pp. 199–200).<sup>24</sup> While there are two Sikh gurdwaras in the area where Sodhi lived, one for 3HO/Sikh Dharma members and one for Punjabi American Sikhs, the relations between the two groups had been precarious until the death of Sodhi brought the two groups together in a Joint Sikh Task Force, albeit within an uneasy alliance. According to the *Phoenix New Times*, it was not until September that the tensions between the two groups were lessened.

That day, despite quiet struggle within the faith, the Indian and the American were both just Sikhs. And from that realization came a new – but tenuous – connection between these two cultures: For the first time since a rift over money and control splintered the community in 1996, a joint Sikh Task Force has been created, formed to identify the Sikh faith to a nation of terrorism-aided onlookers who have trouble seeing beyond turbans and beards. But the challenge that still faces Valley Sikhs in undertaking this task force will be one of self-discovery: In order to identify themselves to the secular world, they must first agree on who they are (Buchanan 2006).

In an event that the two groups organized to honour the memory of Sodhi, a large banner read, 'One God, Many Paths: United We Stand.' Buchanan (2006) notes that given the rather acrimonious history shared by these two groups of Sikhs, 'the second line of the banner, the coda tacked on to the familiar phrase to express their shared grief, was not without irony.' It is interesting to note that in the months and years that have followed 9/11 and the murder of Sodhi, it is increasingly the 3HO/Sikh Dharma voice that has taken on the leading role in terms of educating Americans about the Sikh religion. Nonetheless, according to a Punjabi American Sikh living in Arizona and involved in the Joint Sikh Task Force, 'in God's eyes, there are no Indian Sikhs, there are no American Sikhs, there are only Sikhs. We are all Sikhs' (Buchanan 2006).

The question of authority in Sikhism, as well as this attitude of 'unity in diversity' has been a consistent, although highly problematic aspect of Sikh identity (from the orthodox perspective), both historically and within contemporary Punjab (Jakobsh 2004). For Sikhs, the ultimate authority is clearly given to Sikh scripture, the *Adi Granth*, or, *Guru Granth Sahib*, an authority that has been in place since the death of the tenth and last guru, Guru Gobind Singh. Scripture as the ultimate authority leads, however, to a host of difficult issues, including the most obvious, interpretation of scripture. Sikh scripture is largely composed of devotional hymns, and says virtually nothing about historical and identity issues, that have been central to Sikhism since the seventeenth century. The scripture, for instance, does not address the inauguration of the Khalsa in 1699 and the external Sikh insignia that stem from this central Sikh development (McLeod 1997, pp. 263–7). The *Guru Granth Sahib* is also silent about major aspects of the *Sikh Rahit Maryada*, the Sikh Code of Conduct that was only finalized in its present form as late as the mid-twentieth century. In fact, there are numerous 'Codes' utilized by various sects who are firmly ensconced within the Sikh tradition, both historical and more contemporary schisms. Moreover, gurdwaras, or, houses of worship, are entities unto themselves, managed by annually elected committees according to that particular gurdwara's constitution.<sup>25</sup> This has often led to factionalism within gurdwaras as parties vie for control of leadership. The 'Sant syndrome', as Sewa Kalsi notes, also exerts influence on discussions of authority in Sikhism, as the holy men



(generally) who rise to prominence, due to their piety or important family lineages, wield considerable authority on segments of the Sikh populace (Kalsi 1995, pp. 11–9). Many of these sants, or, babas as they are variously called, are the heads of *deras*, religious headquarters, some of which are located both in India and in diaspora locales, thus ensuring they are representative of their followers beyond the homeland. The range of diversity within the larger Sikh community includes numerous sects, many of which are led by these living gurus, godmen, sants, babas, ascetics (despite Sikhism being known largely as a householder tradition) as well as Sikhs as worshippers of miracle saints, expressly forbidden within the *Sikh Rahit Maryada*, the Sikh Code of Conduct (Geaves 1998, p. 28). The term ‘Sikh’ has also been embraced by those who do not perceive their identity as religious, but rather as an ethnicity.

According to Geaves, a focus on the ‘borders of traditions’ within Sikhism, *alongside* the mainstream, will lead to a more authentic understanding of what constitutes Sikhism (Geaves 1996; also Oberoi 1994).<sup>26</sup> Yet, it is precisely the tolerant attitude towards heterodoxy within Sikhism that has proven to be an especially thorny issue for 3HO/Sikh Dharma members, who insist instead on conformity to what *they* interpret as normative to Sikhism, namely, the Khalsa ideal, particularly its external insignia, the five Ks. However, these are *not* normatively maintained by the majority of Punjabi Sikhs in the diaspora; moreover, only a small minority of Sikh worldwide is initiated into the Khalsa order. The irony of this state of affairs is glaring, given 3HO/Sikh Dharma acceptance of many beliefs and practices that most other Sikhs would claim were thoroughly non-Sikh.

It is highly likely that with the death of Yogi Bajan, clearly a polarizing and controversial figure, the tensions between Punjabi Sikhs and 3HO/Sikh Dharma will continue to lessen. The latter’s organizations are being modified, a process begun even before Bajan’s death, to become more institutional. Leadership of 3HO/Sikh Dharma has been broadened beyond that of the ‘personal charismatic’ (Bird 1993) style represented by Yogi Bajan to include various levels of ministers and administrators. It can also be posited that 3HO/Sikh Dharma representation of Sikhism is having an effect on the wider Punjabi Sikh community, particularly in North America. One indicator is a tiny minority of Punjabi Sikh women who have begun to wear turbans (Mahmood & Brady 2000, p. 51). The 3HO/Sikh Dharma emphasis on equality between women and men has certainly been portrayed as having an effect in raising the status of Sikh women worldwide; the 3HO/Sikh Dharma critique of traditional institutions in this regard, and their insistence that Sikhism is at its core radically egalitarian has been both appreciated and disparaged by Punjabi Sikhs (Jakobsh 2006).<sup>27</sup> The 3HO/Sikh Dharma focus on music has also been viewed as advancing ‘Sikh’ music, or *kirtan*, within Punjabi Sikh communities. But even more so, *kirtan*, through 3HO/Sikh Dharma

musicians, has moved into more mainstream, particularly 'New Age' audiences.<sup>28</sup> A small number of Punjabi Sikhs have also begun sending their children to the Miri Piri Academy in Amritsar, although according to Dusenbery, most soon leave because of the discipline that is imposed by the institution (Dusenbery forthcoming).

It is also possible that with increased interaction, particularly around shared religious and political interests, the variances between the two groups will decrease. Yet, the social distance that has characterized Punjabi Sikh and 3HO/Sikh Dharma relations has largely remained. Significantly, marriage alliances between the two groups are almost non-existent. By and large, 'most Punjabi Sikhs continue to treat Gora Sikhs [white Sikhs] as Sikhs of a different *zat* [caste]' (Dusenbery forthcoming). In this regard, 3HO/Sikh Dharma relations with Punjabi Sikh Americans are similar to Indian Hindu Americans' interaction with members of the ISKCON, the vast majority of whom are non-Indian converts. Alongside other contentious issues such as caste, particularly within the priesthood of ISKCON, non-Indian converts are widely rejected as marriage partners, even within temple communities that are largely shared between ISKCON members and Hindus of Indian origin.

The question then remains, is 3HO/Sikh Dharma a New Religious Movement? Was it ever a New Religious Movement? Is it a sect within a fluid, perhaps even amorphous Sikh tradition? Clearly, there are no easy answers to the question. It could be posited that while 3HO/Sikh Dharma's origins are firmly embedded within the 1960s and 1970s NRM phenomenon, increasing ties to 'normative' Sikhism have somewhat 'dislodged' the 'newness characteristic' of the movement. However, a great deal also remains to be seen vis-à-vis the development of the wider Sikh *panth* itself. There are indications that the somewhat amorphous and heterodox facets of Sikhism are increasingly being undermined in favour of a more homogeneous Sikh identity (see Jakobsh 2004). Indeed, Punjab, the homeland of the Sikhs has as of late seen significant turmoil and violence stemming from a controversy surrounding yet another Sikh godman, Baba Gurmit Ram Rahim Singh, the head of the powerful Dera Sacha Sauda sect. This particular leader claims to have a following of about fifteen million, according to Punjab news media accounts.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps the small size of Yogi Bajan's group allowed for an uneasy, though seemingly increasing, acceptance of 3HO/Sikh Dharma into the fold of the Sikh *panth*. The situation is similar to the loosely affiliated Sikh group led by Baba Virsa Singh with Gobind Sadan centres in India and the USA, their miniscule numbers simply do not warrant a hostile response. Moreover, the 'Orientalist religious revival' (Cox 1977, p. 11), as represented by these erstwhile Eastern seekers, has without doubt had positive effects on the Punjabi Sikh diasporic experience that clearly outweigh the concerns other Sikhs have about them. In many ways, 3HO/Sikh Dharma has fought, and won, a number of significant legal,

societal, religious and political battles that have been highly affirmative for Sikhs at large in North America.

To return to the question of whether or not 3HO/Sikh Dharma fits within the subgroup of NRM, its continuing practices that do not align with the norms of the wider Sikh *panth* to date, and, the many similarities of the group with other NRMs in its development and in its current manifestation,<sup>30</sup> supports, in Eileen Barker's words, the 'keeping [of] the *Nova*' within the context of the 3HO/Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere (2004).

### *Acknowledgement*

I am indebted to my colleague Lorne Dawson for his insights into the wider NRM milieu, and his important contributions to this article.

### *Short Biography*

Doris Jakobsh is Assistant Professor in Religious Studies at the University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Canada. She published *Relocating Gender in Sikh History; Transformation, Meaning and Identity* with Oxford University Press, 2003 (paperback 2005); and numerous articles on women in Sikhism. She has also addressed notions of 'Authority' within the Sikh tradition. Her most recent publications and interests increasingly focus on the phenomenon of Sikh identity construction on the Internet.

### *Notes*

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<sup>1</sup> There is no entry for the group, for example, in Ellwood and Partin's (1988) *Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America*, Timothy Miller's (1995) *America's Alternative Religions*, or Gallagher and Ashcraft's (2006) *Introduction to New and Alternative Religions in America*. George Chryssides' (2001) book, *The A to Z of New Religious Movements*, includes a one-line reference to the group. Gordon Melton dedicates a brief chapter to the group in *The Encyclopedic Handbook of Cults in America*, but it is now quite dated, and there is an overview provided on the Religious Movements Homepage at the University of Virginia <http://www.religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/sikd.html>. The lack of 3HO inclusion in recent collections focusing on NRMs is discussed by Marion S. Goldman. She notes that many scholars focus on the most visible, or, the most violent groups, thus limiting our understanding of how other new religions have been largely integrated into wider society (Goldman 2006, p. 93).

<sup>2</sup> 3HO/Sikh Dharma has not been entirely ignored, particularly within the arena of anthropological study. The earliest work on the movement is by Van Dusenbery, and more recently, from a gender perspective, by Constance Elsberg.

<sup>3</sup> The majority of Sikhs use a variety of colours when wearing traditional Punjabi clothes, known as *pajama kurta* for males (i.e. a long shirt worn over baggy trousers), and *salvar kameez* for women (i.e. a brightly coloured dupatta or shawl).

<sup>4</sup> There have been instances historically of Sikh women also wearing turbans, most specifically among a small renegade sect in the late nineteenth century, known as the Bhasaur Singh Sabha

or Panch Khalsa Divan, founded in 1893. The group's leader, Teja Singh Bhasaur was banished from the Sikh community by the Akal Takht in 1923 for his radical views and the changes he introduced to Sikh tenets. The Panch Khalsa Divan faded soon thereafter. Another prominent Sikh sect known as the Akhand Kirtani Jatha also insists that both women and men wear head covering, but replace the traditional turban with the *keski*, a significantly smaller underturban, which is generally worn by male Sikhs under the larger turban.

<sup>5</sup> The connection between Yogi Bhajan and Baba Virsa Singh has recently been the focus of an online discussion between two former members of the 3HO, Antion Vikram Singh and Kamalla Rose Kaur. Sikh Dharma's focus and homage of Sri Chand, one of the sons of Guru Nanak, who is not traditionally revered by Punjabi Sikhs as they perceive Sri Chand as disobedient in his rejection of his father Nanak path, is also traced to Baba Virsa Singh's teaching (Lamba 2006; Kaur 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Elsberg says, however, that ministers do *not* have the right to carry out initiation rituals (Elsberg 2003, p. 75).

<sup>7</sup> The member interviewed is employed by the group's school in Amritsar, known as the Miri Piri Academy.

<sup>8</sup> On a list of California Yoga teachers made available by the 3HO Kundalini Research Institute, (<http://www.kundaliniyoga.com/>), almost 200 teachers are named. Less than ¼, though, have even remotely sounding 'Sikh Dharma' names, which would include the name 'Kaur' or 'Khalsa'. See <http://www.kundaliniyoga.com/clients/IKYTA/Members.nsf/Members+View+Navigator?OpenForm&Where=-California>.

The numbers are also surprisingly low in New Mexico, outside of Espanola, the headquarters of 3HO/Sikh Dharma. See <http://www.kundaliniyoga.com/clients/IKYTA/Members.nsf/Members+View+Navigator?OpenForm&Where=-New%20Mexico>.

<sup>9</sup> Harvey Cox makes similar observations in his seminal work from the 1970s, *Turning East*, noting that the majority of NRM converts were in their late teens, twenties or early thirties, and, except for the African American Muslim converts, were almost exclusively Caucasians. He also noted that while men and women participated in equal numbers, men were in control of leadership positions (Cox 1977, pp. 93–4, p. 101).

<sup>10</sup> The Golden Temple Company is the parent company of Yogi Teas, Peace Cereal, Wha Guru Chew, Sweet Home Farm, Sunshine Spa, Soothing Touch, Yogi Bhajan Herbal Gems and Yogi Botanicals (Yogi Tea, Golden Temple). According to the Yogi Tea website, 'Yogi Bhajan [is] the "Yogi" behind Yogi Tea' (Yogi Tea, History).

<sup>11</sup> In some respects, the number of students at the Academy is surprisingly low, if the membership data are correct and considering the movement is in its fourth decade.

<sup>12</sup> According to Kaur (2007), this too is an 'innovation' that stems from Yogi Bhajan's early relationship with Baba Virsa Singh.

<sup>13</sup> The Punjabi Sikh writer Trilochan Singh came to North America to observe the phenomenon of Western Sikh converts and wrote a highly critical account of Bhajan and the supposedly 'Sikh' practices of the group, calling the group a 'Tantric Yoga cult' (Singh 1977).

<sup>14</sup> This designation as 'leader' of the Sikhs of the Western Hemisphere was rejected by GS Tohra, the then-president of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, the management committee of Sikh gurdwaras in Punjab. According to Tohra, as cited in TIME, 'Sikhs do not create such offices. Nor, Tohra adds, has the committee given Bhajan the rarely bestowed title, Siri Singh Sahib (the equivalent of saying "Sir" three times), which he uses.' The article also notes that 'Bhajan has repeatedly been accused of being a womanizer. Colleen Hoskins, who worked 7 months at his New Mexico residence, reports that men are scarcely seen there. He is served, she says, by a coterie of as many as 14 women, some of whom attend his baths, give him group massages, and take turns spending the night in his room while his wife sleeps elsewhere' (Yogi Bhajan's Synthetic Sikhism 1977).

<sup>15</sup> The gurdwara is in Millis, Massachusetts. This reverence is highly incongruous with traditional Sikh practices and attitudes, given that (i) Sikhs are not to bow before anyone besides the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the sacred scripture of the Sikhs, and (ii) Sri Chand is considered to be the rebel son of Guru Nanak, because he followed the path of asceticism instead of the householder ideal espoused by Guru Nanak.

<sup>16</sup> See Ronald Enroth's 'The Seduction Syndrome', where he cites a young seeker who notes that '[t]his is such a searching generation, because everything's been so easy for us. Everything's

been handed to us . . . It's almost like we're drowned in a sea of possibilities' (Enroth 1996, p. 205).

<sup>17</sup> Verne Dusenbery's MA Thesis title, 1975.

<sup>18</sup> Douglas Martin, in a recent *New York Times* article, noted that Bhajan, while introducing a syncretic form of Sikhism, retained 'the Sikh tradition of being superb warriors: he mobilized his followers into a security company that guards federal courthouses and Army bases and takes in more than US\$1 billion a year (Martin, 'Yogi Bhajan, 75, "Boss" of Worlds Spiritual and Capitalistic', *New York Times*, 9 October 2004).

<sup>19</sup> See <http://yogibhajan.tripod.com/> for relevant court documents against Yogi Bhajan and his organization.

<sup>20</sup> The Rick A. Ross Institute of New Jersey, an anti-cult online data base, <http://www.rickross.com/> offers documentation of litigations against Bhajan and his various organizations, as well as critical testimonials, and allegations of sexual misconduct against Bhajan.

<sup>21</sup> Condolences from an astounding array of highly placed individuals, alongside testimonials of individuals whose lives were touched by Bhajan, can be found at the main 3HO website <http://www.3ho.org> and at a website run by Sikh Dharma members <http://www.sikhnet.com>.

<sup>22</sup> This was certainly the case during the early years of 3HO/Sikh Dharma. As shall be elaborated further on, there are small numbers of Punjabi Sikh women who are beginning to wear small turbans as well.

<sup>23</sup> Prebish's 'two Buddhisms' notion initially did not focus on ethnic and racial divides between ethnic and convert Buddhists, but he later redefined this dichotomy along these divides (Prebish 1993, 1999, p. 58, p. 296). While acknowledging that this approach has been criticized as being too simplistic in light of the wide spectrum of diversity within Buddhist America, Paul Numrich embraces the dichotomy less for its focus on the racial and ethnic divide, but instead as a useful tool in assessing the function Buddhism plays in the lives of 'ethnic Asian Buddhists' and 'culture Buddhists' (Numrich 2000, p. 195). In the case of the 'two Sikhisms', I am here basing the comparison on Prebish's ethnic/convert lines, while acknowledging that this approach is far too simplistic for a tradition rife with sectarian divisions, namely, Sikhism. For a recent overview on some of the more prominent Sikh sects, see Thakar 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Numrich has noted in his comparison of varied new religious groups that 'only in Buddhist and Muslim forms of social organization do we see an attempt to bridge such distinctions to any significant degree . . . Perhaps the universalist tendency is strongest among Buddhist and Muslims due to their status as multinational religions, a status that impresses immigrant co-religionists from around the globe who settle together in American urban centres, thus providing an impetus to bridge historical boundaries within their faith. Although Hinduism and Sikhism contain some universalist doctrinal underpinnings, their immigrant cohorts remain monoethnic, and thus lack the impetus found in Buddhist and Muslim circles.'

<sup>25</sup> The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, or SGPC, is perhaps the most important ruling body with regard to gurdwaras and other important Sikh shrines, but its authority is limited largely to Punjab.

<sup>26</sup> Harjot Oberoi's seminal work, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries* has brought the varieties of Sikh experiences, practices and attitudes to the fore from a historical perspective. Geaves, on the other hand, criticizes Oberoi in noting that the kind of eclecticism Oberoi dismisses as being largely an *historical* phenomenon is still very much alive in contemporary Punjab (Oberoi 1994; Geaves 1996).

<sup>27</sup> A recent incident at the Golden Temple known as the 'Sewa controversy', in which two British Punjabi Sikh women were not allowed to partake of an important ritual known as the Sukhasan procession, whereby the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the sacred scripture of the Sikhs, is laid to rest at night, has brought many differences between 3HO/Sikh Dharma and Punjabi Sikhs to light. The former group became an instrumental 'Sikh voice', largely through the internet, in chastising the authoritative structures and insisting that these structures were responsible for the continuing inequalities facing Sikh women (see Jakobsh 2006).

<sup>28</sup> While 3HO/Sikh Dharma *kirtan* differs significantly from Punjabi Sikh *kirtan* in instrumentation and language, many Punjabi Sikhs are impressed to have 'their' music spotlighted by this group.

<sup>29</sup> Issues of 'Sikh identity' are at the heart of the unrest. Many of Baba Gurmit Ram Rahim Singh's followers are Sikhs, many of whom are of the lowest castes and many of whom are women. At the core of the unrest are accusations that he is hurting Sikh sentiments by wearing the traditional attire of Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth guru of the Sikhs, alongside his giving of 'nectar' to his followers, in a manner similar to the events of 1699 when Guru Gobind Singh inaugurated the Khalsa. Central to the debate is whether Dera Sacha Sauda can be considered a 'Sikh Dera', one that exists alongside the multitude of Sikh centres or deras in Punjab associated with particular Godmen or Godwomen. While followers of Baba Gurmit Ram Rahim Singh uphold Sikh scriptures as sacred, they also revere the scriptures of Hindu, Muslim and Christian followers. And certainly issues of authority come to the fore as Sikh political and religious bodies ascertain what 'is' and what 'isn't' Sikh (see Walia 2007).

<sup>30</sup> The question about this particular NRM will of course demand another visitation when a scholarly consensus is developed about other groups currently labelled as NRMs, including similar groups such as ISKCON, which, in its historical formation, its group dynamics, leadership, the controversies surrounding it, especially historically, but perhaps most importantly, in its ongoing relationship with ethnic Hindus, is highly significant in terms of its parallel development.

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